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Reston Mystery: Is the CIA Planning to Set Up Shop Downtown?

STAT

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Federal government plans to set up an operation in the heart of Reston's planned urban center have drawn the community into a mystery that possibly involves the nation's top-secret, intelligence-gathering agency.

In a community that prides itself on its openness and diversity, the mystery began with a simple request this summer to the town's planning commission: The planned occupant of the Reston Corporate Center, a 2,500-square-foot office building complex on a five-acre tract, needed to erect a seven-foot-high brick fence for security reasons.

Since then, the request has grown into a debate shrouded by secrecy so thick that Fairfax County officials are not sure what they're arguing about or whom

they're dealing with. Some say the Central Intelligence Agency is involved; the agency will not comment.

STAT "The whole thing is nebulous," Fairfax County Board Vice Chairman Martha V. Pennino said yesterday. "You can't really get your hands on this thing."

Residents who have learned about the plan argue that erecting any kind of wall around the complex would choke off an important portion of a town where many residents find it easy to walk to work, schools and shopping.

"It's at odds with Reston's concept of what Reston should be," said Janet Howell of the Reston Community Association. "We don't fence ourselves in."

Others wonder why a group that is proposing tight security would plan to set up shop adjacent to the Reston Town Center, an office, retail and entertainment complex that is expected eventually to become a busy downtown core.

"That kind of activity, development would be very pedestrian-oriented, where people would want to move between buildings, through the site," said Joseph Stowers, cochairman of the Reston planning and zoning committee.

The mystery grew more intense this week, when Pennino held a meeting to discuss the proposed wall.

During a 90-minute discussion Wednesday, Pennino said two "unnamed federal representatives" told her they planned to conduct activities of a "sensitive, top-secret nature" in the complex on Sunset Hills Road.

"They said what they want is a secure facility," Pennino recalled in an interview yesterday. She said the discussion included the following exchange:

"Why not put [the facility] in Langley?" Pennino said, alluding to the CIA headquarters.

"We really don't have enough space over there," one of the federal representatives said.

In an interview yesterday, Stowers said he is sure the CIA is moving into the complex. He was present at the meeting, along with officials from the company that owns the complex, a member of the Reston Land Corp. and a county planning staff member.

"The conversation focused very freely over what the CIA's requirements were: location, visibility and communication," Stowers said.

But Pennino was more cautious. "Never once did they disclose what agency they were from," she said. "Stowers was the only one who used the term CIA."

The Connection, a Reston newspaper, reported this summer that the CIA will lease all of the office space at Reston Corporate Center and has an option on two buildings that are to be added to the office park.

A CIA spokesman yesterday declined to comment on

the matter. "We really don't talk about where our offices are," said Kathy Pherson.

Officials from the development company that owns the new brick and glass mid-rise buildings declined to provide any information on possible tenants. "We would not ordinarily disclose information about any customer we do business with with the press," said Barry Fitzpatrick, an official of the Rockville-based firm Mulligan-Griffin & Associates.

Pennino said the federal officials, contacted through the development firm, promised to consider her suggestion that a wall similar to the cast iron fence and relatively low cement barriers around the White House be erected instead.

The CIA is enlarging its McLean headquarters with the construction of a \$100 million building adjacent to the main building built in 1963. It will house an additional 3,000 CIA employees.

Reston, part of a stretch of Fairfax that has attracted many high-tech businesses to the area, already has its share of super-secret activities, according to Pennino.

"We have buildings all over Fairfax County that have top-secret clearance activities," she said. "Who knows what all these companies are doing?"

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Reston officials also are concerned about a proposal to expand a federal microwave communications tower operated by the federal government two miles away from the office complex. That plan was discussed briefly during the meeting this week, Pennino said.

Pennino said the owners of the Reston Corporate Center do not need government approval to erect the fence because of current zoning. However, expansion of the tower would have to be approved by the County Board of Supervisors, she said.

"They tried to play on my patriotism," Pennino said, recounting the meeting with the federal representatives. She said they spoke of national security in an age of international unrest in explaining their need for expansion in Reston.

"That's a lot of hogwash," she declared. "There are a lot of other places where they can beam their messages."

